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County water system review talks coming

Editor's note: This the first of two stories on the Wednesday public hearing on reviews of community water systems in rural areas.

By MIKE JOHNSTON, senior writer

State Department of Health officials said Wednesday they will initiate talks with Kittitas County to resolve how more stringent federal drinking water laws can be applied in the county's review of community water systems for rural developments.

At the same time, the state Legislature will be asked to clear up inconsistencies between federal law and state law and agency rules involving the standards of review for Group B rural water systems.

These were the conclusions coming from a more than two-hour public hearing by county commissioners on Wednesday.

State officials last year maintained that the county's review of Group B water systems - which have less than 15 hookups - must include a look at the population served in a development. If the development serves 25 or more people it should come under more stringent Group A requirements as mandated by the federal Safe Drinking Water Act.

The county maintains that those requirements are not in state law and agency rules, and the Group A and B differences are not in federal law. Bowen said state code calls a Group B system one that has one ground water well serving less than 15 hookups regardless of the number of people.

Greg Grunenfelder, assistant secretary for Environmental Health with the state Department of Health, said in the hearing that federal drinking water laws supersede state and local government rules, but acknowledged that the state hasn't corrected state rules to make them consistent with federal law.

A state-granted agreement giving the county authority to review, approve and monitor Group B systems will end Jan. 11 because of the disagreement. Grunenfelder said ending the agreement wasn't an effort to point blame at the county.

State officials said they want to form a new, cooperative agreement with the county Department of Health on how it reviews requests for community water systems that use single ground water wells.

"We want to take the initiative and start fresh with an entirely new agreement that clears up the inconsistencies," said Scott Torpie, the state Health Department's regional manager for the Office of Drinking Water, after the hearing. "Everyone wants a resolution on this; everyone believes it is very worthwhile for an agreement to continue.

County Commissioner David Bowen, after the session, said his goal of "getting everybody together in the same room and on the same page" was realized Wednesday as a major step to resolve disagreements between the state and county.

"We'll continue working with the state Department of Health on a new agreement and try to get a fix in the Legislature on the laws," Bowen said